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Critical Voices Against the Cooperative Principle

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Abstract

The Cooperative Principle (CP), Grice's influential contribution to pragmatics, advances strongly in linguistics, philosophy, psychology and sociology. However, doubts and criticisms on it have been unceasing. They are mainly concerned with the following four aspects: The term "cooperation" itself is ambiguous; the question of whether the CP belongs to a range of principles or rules has not been decided; The four maxims cannot be applied extensively; The descriptions of the violations are not too persuasive. These critical views are the results of some scholars' misunderstandings. First, they ignore to give self-definition of "cooperation" in the CP; Second, they mix the concepts and relationship between the cooperative principle and conversational maxims; Thirdly, they indiscreetly impose the cooperative essence of the CP on the maxims so that maxims are imprisoned.

Key words: The Cooperative Principle (CP); Doubt; Criticism; Misunderstanding

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INTRODUCTION

Since the Cooperative Principle (CP) was proposed by Grice in *Logic and Conversation* in 1967, there have

long been controversies on it from wide-ranging fields. Affirmative opinions are mainly from linguistics and pragmatics. In linguistics, it is widely recognized that the CP has huge historical significance due to the separation of pragmatics from linguistics (Hadi, 2013; Ke, 2016). Grice's theory makes language study more practical and closer to the reality, and also inspires linguists to adopt a more dynamic pragmatic approach in researches rather than only study static language form and meaning (Grandy, 1989). More specifically, there is a consensus that the CP is helpful for the hearer to infer the intended meaning and understand exactly the speaker's real purposes and attitudes (Cheng & Zheng, 2001; Feng, 2013). Grice's theory works much better as an analysis of informing, telling, and communicating (Davis, 1998, p.114; Ke, 2016).

The CP also gains many positive remarks from semantics. Blome-Tillmann (2013) reckons that Grice's theory provides principled and systematic ways to account for a multitude of utterance meaning. It makes a breakthrough in traditional semantics which only focuses on truth-value (Xiong, 2008). Thereby, as the centre of this theory, the CP opens the door of a more fruitful and constructive study of natural language semantics. Those who study the language under cultural backgrounds hold that the CP offers a new option for approaching implicature that is historically sensitive and culture-specific (Davis, 2008; Ke, 2016).

Additionally, in light of philosophy, Feng (2008) thinks that the CP is a philosophical methodology by which people realize the abstract nature of relationship between logic and conversation. Wang (2012) and Zhang (2010) present that the CP gives the perspective of application and feasibility of communicative analysis, which structures, concretes and formalizes the obscure talk exchange phenomena into different degrees (Ke, 2016).

As the centre of the discipline of pragmatics (Hadi, 2013), it is obvious that Grice's theory, with its unique advantages, advances strongly in linguistics, philosophy,

psychology and sociology. However, doubts and criticisms on the CP have been unceasing. The deficiencies of the theory are mainly criticized as the follows: (a) the term “cooperation” itself is ambiguous; (b) whether the CP belongs to a range of principles or rules has not been decided yet; (c) the four maxims cannot be applied extensively; (d) the descriptions of the violations are not too persuasive.

1. THE DIVERSIFIED INTERPRETATIONS OF THE AMBIGUOUS TERM “COOPERATION”

Grice delineates that people tend to communicate cooperatively in a logical and rational way. The hearer would catch the implicature from the speaker’s remarks by drawing on an assumption of cooperativeness. This habit has been learned during their childhood and kept forever (Yao, 2012), but Grice did not elucidate the concept of cooperation (Hadi, 2013; Ladegaard, 2008), which is comparatively vague (Yao, 2012). Many other critics have overlooked or even misunderstood the ambiguous term “cooperation” (Ladegaard, 2008; Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1992; Thomas, 1998).

The interpretations of the CP are sometimes problematic because Grice’s technical term “cooperation” often confounds with the general meaning of “cooperation” (Davies, 2007; Feng, 2005; Hadi, 2013; Wang, 2011). Applying two interpretations in the same field creates confusion among linguistics “cooperation drift” (Davies, 2007). Grice’s “cooperation” is different from the everyday notion of cooperation (Hadi, 2013; Ladegaard, 2008; Li, 2008; Mey, 2001), and thinks that its meaning is much closer to the general meaning of “cooperation” (Davies, 2007).

Because of its ambiguity, many scholars make distinctions between different kinds of cooperation in order to specify Grice’s notion as well as to limit its scope of definition. One of the views holds that “cooperation” in the CP should include the cooperative attitude of the listener rather than the speaker’s effort only (i.e producing utterance) (Lin & Yu, 2002; Jing, 2005). Based on the classification of “cooperation” in social activities (e.g ad, literature) and “cooperation” in verbal behavior, Grice’s “cooperation” refers to the collective consulting process of communicative purpose and particular ways of how to apply verbal behaviors with both sides’ effort of following interaction conventions of their community (Zhang, 2009). Pavlidou (1991) puts up that Gricean “cooperation” is a formal meaning that is following conversational maxims or against them, which differs from substantial cooperation. Aireni (1993) generally divided it into communicative cooperation and extra-communicative cooperation, while Grice’s notion is similar to the former. Gu (2003) deems that Gricean “cooperation” contains

pragmatic cooperation and rhetorical cooperation. Furthermore, Lumsden (2008), Sarangi and Slembrouck (1992), Thomas (2008) share the view that Grice’s “cooperation” includes social goal sharing cooperation and linguistic cooperation. While some scholars approve that Grice’s concept not only deal with cooperation on language but also concerted efforts on behavior (Holdcroft, 1983; Asa, 1982; Okolo, 2017; Pratt, 1981; Sampson, 1982; Wilson & Sperber, 1981), Greenall (2002) claims that Gricean notion of the term is a kind of weak-form cooperation.

The ambiguity of the term “cooperation” is also the result of the different hierarchies involved in it. Yao (2012) deems that “cooperation” in the CP is defined basically as “making transferring and understanding information possible”. Grice’s “utterance” include “parole” and “nonverbal behavior”, which indicates that his “cooperation” contains four hierarchies at least: (a) both sides make the conversation accessible and proceed smoothly (Fraser & Nolen, 1981; Gu, 2003; Jiang, 2003) in which the speaker gives utterances and the hearer says something as response (Jiang, 2003); (b) satisfy the speaker’s requirements in verbal level instead of those of social goal from the hearer (e.g perfunctoriness); (c) both sides make utterances meet the social demands but not in verbal level; (d) both sides’ demands for social goal and speech both are met (Yao, 2012).

It is not suitable to explain Grice’s “cooperation” broadly, because it only takes place in verbal interactions (Liang, 2006; Saeed, 2000), otherwise ambiguity would come. Back to the CP itself, as it said: “Make your conversational contribution such as requires, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”. From Grice’s work, it is obvious that common aims of the participants correspond with the cooperative nature of conversation. “Accepted purpose” requires people to make their utterances accessible by using the same language code, following particular language conventions and social habits (Yao, 2012). Accepted purpose refers to communicate efficiently, or in general the effort of exerting effect on others (same as Grice), rather than providing detailed information exactly in a narrow sense (Grandy, 1989; Gu, 2003). “Cooperation” should be interpreted in terms of what people want to obtain from their communications (Ladegaard, 2008), and whether the conversation is cooperative depends on interlocutors’ purposes (Yao, 2012), especially by their “mutually accepted goal” (Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1992).

2. THE CONTROVERSIAL CATEGORY OF PRINCIPLE OR RULE

The CP has also been criticized strictly on account of a question: Whether people should follow the CP

mandatorily? Grice considers the CP and its subordinate maxims as principles instead of rules, to which speakers orient themselves (Sperber & Wilson, 1981). However, whether the CP refers to principles or rules is under severe debate.

Feng (2005) argues that the CP should be prescribed as “rough general principle” with binding force (Cameron & Taylor, 1982). Green (1990) also claims that it refers to a principle because the rule is either adhered to or broken, but there is a large grey area in the CP. Leech (1983) and Searle (1989) reckon that, in linguistics, meaning of “principle” is regulative and pragmatic but “rule” is grammatical and constitutive. The meaning of “principle” is closer to the nature of the CP-pragmatic and regulative principles. Thomas (1998) puts up three reasons to prove that the “P” in the CP indicates principles: (a) Rules are all or nothing but principles are more or less. That is, a rule is either in operation or it isn’t. The CP belongs to the principle because it can apply to vary degrees, the maxim of manner presupposes that you can speak extremely clearly, fairly or not clearly at all. (b) Rules are definite, principles are probabilistic. In principle, it cannot say with absolute certainty what something means or what effect an utterance will have. (c) Rules are conventional and arbitrary but principles are motivated. For instance, people would have incentive to achieve their aims if they speak politely. Verscharen (1999) also adds that maxims are different from rules, because “maxims are seen as generally valid rather than to count only for specified cases”.

Nonetheless, Okolo (2017) thinks conversations are rule-governed behavioral acts and the rules are conversational maxims. Dornyei and Sarah (1992) all treat maxims as rules which describe how participants cooperate in conversation to achieve smooth and efficient interaction. Marmaridou (2002) claims that the CP is a kind of constitutive rule of human communication, while Chomsky (1975, p.114) expresses his opinion that there is a fixed and complete set of rules that speakers and listeners share.

3. THE INFEASIBILITY OF THE MAXIMS

3.1 Overgeneralizaion

The maxims in the CP are regarded by scholars as overgeneralized. Four maxims often confused communicators owing to not be distinguished clearly by Grice (Qin, 2014; Zhang, 1996; Zhang, 2009), and to some vague statements in the maxims (Mey & Haberland, 1992; Sperber & Wilson, 1981; Zhan, 2009; Zhang, 2009; Zhong, 2008). Sometimes people will be puzzled in the inferential process (Xu, 1993) because Grice did not give detailed explanations about how the listener knows the speaker’s intentions from the literal meaning of his utterances and how the hearer sets up connection

between the speaker’s utterance and his intention to get the implicature (Qin, 2014). The maxims even do not take general implicature and conventional implicature in adequate details (Suo, 2000; Zhang, 2008). Also, Grice calls for the speaker and the listener make joint effort for exchanging information and understanding each other, but in the CP, there is not any specific ways in which people achieve this goal (Asa, 1982; Lin & Yu, 2002), yet examples without common purpose.

Some others claim that the CP is too idealistic to assume all interactions ground in the cooperative nature (Bethan, 2007; Eelen, 2001; Hadi, 2013), and sometimes the purpose is uncooperative and undermines the conversation (Hadi, 2013). As Fred (2001) and Thomas (1998) have said, not everyone would fulfill the expectation that he/she will make a responsible effort to speak the truth. Ladegaard (2008) critiques that Grice’s assumption is that people communicate logically and all of them attempt to be “good” communicators. However, human interactions may be irrational and illogical and interactants seem to try their best to be “bad” communicators.

Still, there is another school of criticism which holds that the CP has neglected the effect of extralinguistic variables and the role of culture to language. Extralinguistic variables, including the relationship between the communicators, role definition (Bethan, 2007; Okolo, 2017; Pratt, 1981; Sarangi & Slembrouck, 1992; Wu, 2011; Zhong, 2008), intonation, stress, language speed (Thomas, 1998), can limit ranges of specific verbal behavior that make conversational strategies possible within a particular discourse situation. The different contents or pronunciations of the same word or expression may lead to misunderstanding between two sides due to their distinctive cultural backgrounds, which may lead to the violation of the CP (Davis, 1998, p.114). And if the CP is suitable for English-speaking cultures, it is not proper to explain the Chinese expressions (He, 2012).

3.2 Incomprehensiveness

The maxims cannot be applied universally. Liu and Zhang (2008) point out that scope of the CP’s application is unspecified. Leech (1983) and Feng (2008) think the CP is neither practical nor applicable for “real language use”, nobody always talks the same as what the CP describes. In a word, the CP cannot be applied in all kinds of conditions in which sentence types, language species, conversational types and other social and psychological factors exert effects.

Firstly, those examples chosen by Grice are not representative conversations because most of them are declarative sentences (Fairclough, 1985), and the majority of declarative sentences do not have the information-bearing function (Denis & Michelle, 1973). The maxims can easily be misinterpreted to be guidelines for etiquette,

instructing the speakers on how to be moral and polite conversationalists (Larkin & O'Malley, 1973). Therefore, Zhou (1994, pp.438-439) turns Grice's four maxims into five maxims by adding examples of non-declarative sentences (Wang, 2012).

Secondly, it only describes part of the natural language but it is not suitable for literature language (Manoochehr et al., 2010; Xiong, 2007; Zhao, 2014). In fact, concretized natural language with logic may result in dislocation (sometimes some language phenomena cannot be supported by the CP) because of vague natural language. Conversational types such as verbal silence (Michal, 2012), soliloquy and intercultural interaction (Elinor, 1976) are not discussed in the maxims (Huang, 2012; Schaubert & Spolsky, 1986).

Thirdly, it may not be totally compatible with a cognitive and social approach (Hadi, 2013; Levinson, 1979; Speaks, 2008; Turner, 2002; Zhang, 2008). It is acknowledged that the overlook of social context has been the dramatic converging point of criticisms (Ke, 2016; Ladegaard, 2008; Levinson, 1979; Wang, 2012; Yang, 2000; Zhang, 2008). Social and psychological conditions of speakers determine people's intentions as to whether or not to cooperate in a conversation, which should be considered (Agnes, 2013; Ladegaard, 2008; Speaks, 2008). Moreover, Cheng (2009) deems that what are prescribed in the CP smack of subjectivity such as "do not say what you believe to be false", because it is hard to define whether the statement you produce or receive is true or false. Johnson (2010) thinks that everyone's unique cognitive pattern depends on their different individual experiences and perceptions (Ke, 2016).

4. THE UNPERSUASIVE EXPLANATIONS OF VIOLATION

4.1 The Doubtful Description of Violation

Grice's expositions about violation of the CP also bring up much criticism. Grice holds that four maxims are something that are reasonable for people to follow and should not be abandoned (1975, p.309). Indeed, Grice does not force everyone to obey the CP, while in which people can find support when in conversation (Cheng, 2009). However, the use of term "principle" and "maxim" does not mean the CP and its maxims will be followed all the time (Dou, 2010). In Shen's (1997) perspective, the CP and its maxims cannot be flouted, otherwise, no communication would be possible (Feng, 2008; Jiang, 2002).

But there are many exceptions. Arezou and Ali (2014) propose that sometimes the speaker purposefully adopt a non-cooperative attitude and violate the CP, and they still imply points, reasons and information. Clark et al. (1991) say that not answering a question particularly effectively

may not demonstrate it flouts, violates or breaks the maxims. Giving a little or too much information may not show perfect execution, but it is scarcely a violation of the maxims. In fact, observing the CP is relative (Jiang, 2002).

The CP is a certain mode of analyzing meaning rather than instructing verbal communication (Feng, 2005). The hierarchical concept of "cooperation" in the CP indicates that some violations are superficial and temporary (Attardo, 1997; Yao, 2012; Zhu & Liu, 2015). And even uncooperative conversation includes ostensible uncooperation and virtual uncooperation (Chen, 2013). Therefore it is too cursory to take not following the CP the same as violating it, because sometimes violation of the CP is a variable of ways of obeying it (Jiang, 2002; Yang & Hou, 2010).

As a consequence, the CP and violation of the CP are two kinds of communication principles, both of which can make successful conversation (Zhu & Liu, 2015). Following the CP completely in some particular situations and violating the CP randomly prevents the communication from being discontinued. Any conversational participant should know how to choose different communication principles to use in particular time and place.

4.2 The Unmentioned Causes of the Violation

Suppose that those uncooperative language phenomena are considered as "violation" in the real sense, many collective voices present that the CP cannot explain comprehensively why people are often so indirect in conveying what they mean (Arezou & Ali, 2014; Leech, 1983; Li, 2008; Hadi, 2013; He, 1999; Tong et al., 2012; Zheng, 2008). In a word, the causes of violation in the CP and its maxims have not been investigated, which may result from different perspectives.

In semantics, the characteristics of language may result in violating the CP. In English, violation can also be raised by some words with the feature of semantic fuzziness such as "some, several, a few" (Chen, 1999), or by polysemy phenomenon in Chinese (Dong, 2005; Zhu & Liu, 2015).

In sociology, chances are that the CP is violated by the needs of professions on special social class (Zhu & Liu, 2015), or the insufficiency of communicative competence which leads to failure in cross-culture communication caused by pragmatic errors such as when use loanwords and dialects (Tong et al., 2011; Zhu & Liu, 2015). Besides, some causes about politics and religion also contribute to violation (Dong, 2005; Ke, 2016). People also are obliged to violate the CP so as to show politeness (Zhu & Liu, 2015).

In pragmatics, Dong (2005) asserts that there are positive and negative rhetorical objectives in the communication. People would flout the rules with rhetorical objectives (Tong et al., 2011; Ke, 2016) or they

just want to give emphasis through violation (Sri & Maria, 2009).

In psychology, Chen (2010) summarizes five psychological causes of violation. In communication, words might be conveyed with interlocutors' emotions that probably contains contemplation, sentiment, misgivings, longings or concealment. Goal-conflicted relation is also responsible for the violation. In the case, interlocutors choose to go against the CP implicitly (Tong et al., 2011; Ke, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Having a general overview of the critical arguments against the CP during these years, this thesis discussed four contentious points of the CP. Four points are the various interpretations of the vague term "cooperation", the controversial category of principle or rule, the inapplicability of the maxims and the lame explanations of the violation.

For one thing, the CP has many undeniable shortcomings, such as it does not give a lucid delineation of cooperation, and it does not take social factors or interlocutors' psychological condition into consideration. For the other, it is admitted that these numerous critiques are too strict to the CP. Some opinions are presented aiming to rehabilitate the CP. Firstly, most opponents lack of a sufficient understanding of the CP. They fail to give a precise definition to "cooperation" in their own works so as to be misled. Secondly, most of them, especially domestic researchers, do not figure out the basic definition at the beginning. They confuse the principle with the maxims so that concept of the cooperative principle and the conversational maxims and their relationship are misconceived. Thus, there are some topics such as "cooperative maxims" or "conversational principle" on the critiques (Liu, 2002). Thirdly, they generalize the cooperative characteristic of the CP as its contents, consequently there are some occasions in which the CP cannot be applied.

The CP has received more objections. Liang (2006) has said, the CP only describes an idealized state of daily conversations without coerciveness. Explaining and applying the CP properly is certainly based on an exact understanding of it. In effect, the value of the CP lies on offering approaches to explain abstract non-semantic phenomena rather than restrict particular verbal behaviors. Even more, the CP is exactly endowed with universality, which highly generalizes the essence of the production and comprehension of conversational implicature in order to form an unsurpassable framework of pragmatics and other subjects (Feng, 2008). To be sure, although limitations, the CP is still the centre of the disciplines of pragmatics and the important role it plays in this field cannot be denied (Hadi, 2013; Thomas, 1998).

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